



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 96

DISCOVERING AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

As we work to meet our authorized civilian employment levels and compete with other employers for talented and dedicated employees, we need to think broadly about the variety of recruitment sources available. One source too often overlooked is persons with disabilities. To address this problem, the President signed Executive Order 13078, establishing a Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities. The task force is charged with creating a coordinated and aggressive national policy to bring working-age individuals with disabilities into gainful employment in the Federal government.

As everyone is aware, competition for jobs today is much greater than in the past. For example, in 1983 the U.S. unemployment rate was almost 11 percent; today it's 4 percent. There's no indication the number of people available for employment will grow substantially in the next few years. Consequently, we need to keep all effective recruitment sources in mind.

Workforce statistics show persons with disabilities are generally an untapped resource in employment -- and the story is no different in the Coast Guard. Public policy mandates that the Federal government be a model employer of persons with disabilities. Expanding the applicant pool to increase employment opportunities for persons with disabilities not only makes for good public policy, but excellent business sense as well. We need to actively participate in the renewed Federal-wide commitment to employ people with disabilities. This includes keeping our supervisors and managers informed about the variety of tools available to facilitate the employment of persons with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities, including veterans, can be hired directly and quickly into ***permanent*** civilian positions through special hiring authorities. These were developed to allow people with disabilities to show they can do the job and to circumvent any attitudinal barriers Federal selecting officials may have. According to a survey on Disability Employment Policies and Practices in Federal Agencies initiated by the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities in June 1999, only one in four Federal agencies reported frequently using these special hiring authorities. Since 1996, the Coast Guard has made only three hires using these special authorities. We need to strengthen our recruitment program by keeping these special authorities in mind and using them whenever possible.

In addition, many excellent technical support programs are available to assist managers and supervisors in recruiting and retaining employees with disabilities. The Department of Transportation has set up its new Disability Resource Center (DRC) to provide a one-stop source for resources and referral on accessibility and accommodation questions for all DOT employees. The DRC is centrally funded to

provide accommodation consistency within the Department and to eliminate the worry of where to find money for accommodation purchases.

The DRC will work with our managers and employees to resolve potential conflicts or misunderstandings about job accommodations, and will facilitate a more open means of communication when necessary. The DRC will clearly define the circumstances under which an accommodation can be approved or denied, so that all persons affected by the accommodation can understand their roles and responsibilities in the accommodation process. The initial contact regarding job accommodation questions shall be made with the servicing Command Staff Advisor.

As an example, a DOT employer was considering hiring an applicant with a hearing impairment for a materials handler position. The employer had communication concerns regarding the interview process and communication and safety concerns regarding the applicant's ability to perform the essential functions of the position. DRC was able to provide an interpreter for the interview and suggested a variety of options regarding reasonable accommodation in the warehouse, including set paths of travel, traffic rules and strobe lights. As a result of the interview, the employer discovered that the individual's hearing aids provided enough assistance for him to work safely. The employer also established set paths of travel, traffic rules and strobe lights which improved the safety of all workers on the warehouse floor. The cost of the interpreter (\$350) was paid for by DRC, not the hiring command.

Increasing the representation of people with disabilities in the Coast Guard civilian workforce will require a dedicated and sustained effort by our managers and human resource specialists to identify where our recruiting efforts are most likely to be fruitful. To do this we must:

- Proactively recruit by working with state vocational rehabilitation coordinators and community organizations that assist persons with disabling conditions.
- Market the Coast Guard's job opportunities to disability-related agencies and organizations.
- State clearly in our job announcements our interest in receiving applications from persons with disabilities, and describe the available special appointing authorities.
- Conduct outreach with State and local vocational rehabilitation agencies, and the Veterans Administration.
- Provide employment opportunities for students with disabilities.
- Give full consideration to employees with disabilities for inclusion in developmental opportunities.
- Provide reasonable accommodation for qualified applicants and employees with disabilities.
- Better inform our managers and supervisors of the various hiring programs and resources available in

recruiting and maximizing the capabilities of employees with disabilities.

A Departmental Memorandum issued by the DOT General Counsel outlining the legal obligations of all Department managers and supervisors under Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act will be posted on our civilian personnel website.

Our human resource staff stands ready to work with our managers and supervisors in hiring people with disabilities and leading them into successful, rewarding careers with the Coast Guard.

Please make sure you make good use of the special authorities available for hiring the disabled so that we may strengthen our civilian workforce and raise the Coast Guard's civilian employment to the levels authorized by Congress.

Regards, FL Ames



[Flag Voice Contents](#)

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